

The Participation Forum

February 17, 1994

Session No. 1

Topic: Host Country Participation in USAID's Country Strategy Development*

The first monthly session of the Participation Forum featured presentations of three different experiences in which USAID country strategies had been developed with considerable host country involvement: Chad, described by Mission Director Anne Williams; Togo, described by John Grant, former Deputy Mission Director and currently Deputy Director of the Program Office in the Bureau of Humanitarian Response; and Uganda, described by Mission Director Keith Sherper. Diane La Voy, the Administrator's point person for participation in PPC, welcomed participants and introduced the speakers. Deputy Administrator Carol Lancaster kicked off the Forum series by noting that "We have been talking about participation at USAID for twenty to twenty-five years....Obviously we are doing a good bit of it, and these forums should help us to it more effectively...." Joan Atherton, Senior Advisor for Social Science, Office of Development Planning in the Bureau for Africa, provided some context for the three country cases. Following the three presentations, Curt Grimm, AAAS Fellow in the Africa Bureau's Office of Development Planning, discussed some results from on-going research on USAID African field mission efforts to broaden participation and foster local collaboration. A brief period of discussion concluded the session.

The Context for Consultation in Africa

Joan Atherton

Since 1987 and the initial passage of the Development Fund for Africa (DFA) legislation, there has been a wave of democratization in Africa. Fifteen countries are fully fledged democracies; nineteen are in transition. This creates a favorable environment for

The Participation Forum is a series of monthly noontime meetings for USAID personnel organized by Diane La Voy, Senior Policy Advisor for Participation. These explore how to put into practice the Administrator's mandate to "build opportunities for participation into the development processes in which we are involved" ("Statement of Principles on Participatory Development, November 16, 1993"). In each Forum guest speakers from in and outside of USAID describe their experiences and enter into a general discussion of the theme of the session. A summary of the meeting is disseminated within USAID by E-mail, and readers are encouraged to engage in an E-mail dialogue. Those within USAID should direct their E-mail to Diane La Voy; those outside can send their remarks via INTERNET, May@rcc.rti.org. Printed copies of the Forum summaries will be distributed to participants and attendees from outside of USAID and others interested in participatory development.

promoting participation and makes it more possible for USAID to follow the lead of nationals in their debate over development objectives than has previously been the case in the region.

The legislation creating the DFA mandated participation: "the Agency for International Development shall take into account the local-level perspectives of the rural and urban poor in sub-Saharan Africa, including women, during the planning process for project and program assistance" and "should consult with African, United States, and other private and voluntary organizations."

The DFA legislation gives USAID flexibility in exchange for accountability for results, and should in theory permit us to develop programs based on country realities as determined by participatory processes tempered with analysis. However, the various targets (10% for population; 10% for maternal/child health; 10% for environment; 5% for AIDS) and some Agency-wide earmarks (e.g., in basic education) limit USAID's ability to respond to the needs and desires identified via enhanced participation.

Strategies are about building consensus around key choices made about the use of limited assistance resources. Having received broad guidance as to the mandate of the DFA and the parameters of programming, each mission can take its own path in the development of its Country Program Strategic Plan (CPSP), and, in terms of participation, lots of different flowers have bloomed, as today's cases from Africa will show.

Consultation in Chad

Anne Williams

The strategy-building process I will describe today was designed and implemented by Carole Sherrer-Palma, former Deputy Mission Director in Chad, who unfortunately was not able to participate in this forum today. I believe that despite the many difficulties of working in Chad -- little available data, difficult transportation, hard living conditions -- and the special problems during the 1990-1992 period during which the strategy was being designed -- a coup d'état, two or three attempted coups d'états, two evacuations, and a bad food year -- USAID and Chad were able to come up with a very workable strategy.

Meetings and Retreats. The process of building USAID's country strategy in Chad began with a series of analytical studies that looked at Chad from various perspectives. These were prepared by consultants who traveled around the country observing and talking to people. When the studies were complete, USAID held a series of meetings and retreats. We kicked off our own analytical process with a two-day retreat attended by USAID and contractor staff, representatives from PVOs, the World Bank, and UNDP, and Chadian government officials up to the director general (i.e., permanent secretary) level to discuss the studies. In small representative working groups, participants looked at the overall goal statement and identified maternal/child health care and agricultural marketing as the main areas of concentration. In addition, food security was identified as a target of opportunity.

The parameters thus set, Management Systems International (MSI)** came out and assisted the mission and contractor staff, plus PVO representatives, to hammer out the logframe. The mission virtually closed down for a week. After people had mulled this logframe over and begun writing text to follow it, a third retreat was held solely for mission staff to re-evaluate the strategy and to orient new personnel.

MSI is the lead entity in the PPC/CDIE PRISM contract for providing technical support to the development of strategic frameworks and measurement plans for country assistance programs.

Consulting with Chadian Partners. After this final retreat, mission personnel felt they had to go back and speak with our Chadian partners, particularly the government, on specific decisions within the strategy. These talks sometimes led to considerable changes in the strategy. For example, USAID had been considering a national approach to health, but, based on the government's decentralization strategy and a debate within the mission, USAID decided to look at a regional approach. This represented a change in the mission's mindset.

Proxies for Grassroots Consultation. The mission did not consult directly with the grassroots during the strategy-building process because it would have added years to an already-long process. Instead the mission used a couple of proxies for the grassroots. First, the PVOs. They had been working in Chad for a long time and were supposed to represent the voice of the people. (I am not sure this is always true; PVOs also have their own agendas.)

Also, UNDP had organized a series of regional seminars with representatives of "groupements" -- local associations of peasants -- that allowed the voice of the people to be heard. Time limitations prevented USAID staff from participating in this process, but the mission was able to obtain reports of the meetings.

Lessons Learned. Overall, because lots of players were brought into the strategy-building process, the credibility of that process was enhanced. Other lessons were learned:

- Government participation helped us to make key decisions and created a sense of ownership for the strategy. However, frequent changes in government mean that we have to start all over again.
- USAID does not give the missions enough time to pay adequate attention to participation. Chadians view consensus as paramount, but building consensus can be a long process.
- Participation implies partnership. USAID missions have to learn to listen -- something we are bad at doing.
- Country strategies should be developed mutually instead of unilaterally by USAID. This can create difficulties, however, because other cultures do not use the same processes for decision-making that we do. We must be culturally sensitive to these processes in order to get the kind of consensus and participation that we want.

Consultation in Togo

John Grant

In Togo, the strategy-building process began during an exciting time. It was late 1991, and the country had just had a National Conference and had put aside its dictator of 27 years and was in a transition to democracy. USAID's budget had just been increased from \$4 to \$10 million. The new mission director and I arrived in country with a mandate to develop a strategy to build on this democratic process.

The "Etats Generaux". The National Conference was like the second independence of Togo. Run by Togolese, the conference, attended by about 1,000 people, was televised. The country practically came to a standstill for six weeks while the entire population watched the proceedings. The conference declared that it was the sovereign body of Togo, put in motion the

development of a new constitution, and decided to hold a series of Etats Generaux, or general assemblies, in each sector (health, agriculture, land reform, culture, sports, etc.) to reflect the will of the people.

USAID and other donors supported these assemblies which were not uniformly successful. For example, in the agriculture meeting, some farmers were represented among the 400 participants, but they were outvoiced by the powerful parastatals and government bureaucrats. But in the health sector, more progress was made; USAID, the major donor in this area, became fully engaged in the process. Many constructive things came out -- including the need for increased private sector participation, improved cost recovery, and increased access to low cost drugs -- and were embodied in the USAID strategy. Unfortunately the whole process got turned back as the old president began to muscle his way back onto the political scene, and the country was shaken by strikes and violence. Also, the government did not make the budgetary allocations required to fund the reforms recommended.

Extensive Consultation; Limited Involvement. Togo is an interesting case with respect to participation. It is a small, easy-to-get-around-in country in which USAID has a big role. There is lots of PVO participation. Some USAID technical staff and their Togolese counterparts share offices. Also, the Togolese like Americans. We have been one of the largest donors, and we don't have the colonial baggage of the French and the British in the region. Consequently, consulting with the Togolese was easy and we consulted throughout the strategy-building process. However, the turbulent political situation was a constraint; government and NGO offices were closed for long periods as a result of the strikes and violence.

The strategy-building process began with a macroeconomic analysis and a series of field-oriented sector assessments carried out by consultants who met with government officials and also went out into the rural areas. We found the Manual for Action in the Private Sector (MAPS)^{***} to be a very effective tool in developing strategy options for work with the private sector and business development, and it involved extensive surveys and focus group interviews with entrepreneurs. Later the MSI team came out to assist with the logframe.

Development of the mission strategy was an interesting process, but it was not perfect. We consulted with local people but did not involve them as much as we might have in deciding which strategy options to adopt. Final decisions were made more or less in-house and in consultation with Washington.

Lessons Learned. There are a number of obstacles or constraints to participation:

- Some African countries are very hierarchical. It is difficult for people at the bottom to have a voice.
- Mission strategies do not begin with a tabula rasa. There are projects in the pipeline and a lack of flexibility. Getting out of some sectors and into others is like turning a big ship around.
- Participation should be built into all processes -- project planning, evaluation, and so on -- not just strategy-formulation.
- Deadlines are tight and staff time is short.

MAPS is an analytical approach to assessment of private sector activity and opportunities for assistance used by the Africa Bureau.

- USAID mission personnel are not as accessible as they should be; we need to make more of an effort to get out into the field and meet with local people.
- Some mission personnel have attitudinal problems with respect to NGOs whom they view as pushing their own agendas.
- Broad-based consultation raises expectations, yet we have limited funds and are able to focus on only one or two priority areas in our mission strategies.
- Last minute shifts in priorities in Washington can jeopardize a strategy built with participation.

Consultation in Uganda

Keith Sherper

Some sort of dialogue on aspirations and priorities at the community level is necessary, for if we are to measure impact, we need to know what is going on among the people we are trying to assist. We must seek a balance between USAID's strategies, host country development priorities, and the felt needs of the people. This requires an understanding of conditions on the ground.

This dialogue does not need to be comprehensive to be sufficient. We are not looking for 100% perfection. The breadth and depth of participation is a mission-level judgment.

Three Participatory Exercises. In Uganda, our approach in preparing the CPSP was to emphasize participation by actively seeking out the views of local USAID staff, people the mission worked with, and some segments of the general population. Local USAID staff were encouraged to give their views and question us on the strategy. This process was extremely helpful in giving us a broad perspective and wide range of views.

In Uganda we carried out three participatory exercises. The first was a contractor-facilitated off-site meeting for the entire mission. Second, the people that had been assigned to write sections of the CPSP gave presentations to all mission staff for feedback. And by "all" I mean all -- the drivers and warehouse workers included. Third, we used focus groups to collect information throughout the CPSP process.

Focus Groups. Three rounds of focus groups meetings were held. Groups were formed in five geographic areas of the country. (One of the groups in a remote rural area was formed by an indigenous NGO.) The first round was an open-ended discussion in which people were encouraged to state their concerns and aspirations. There seemed to be a consensus that the country was still in the peace-making process and that some economic stability had been achieved. Education, health, and democratization were the biggest concerns. The process generated a great deal of enthusiasm; many people said it was the first time they had been asked their opinions.

The second round examined and prioritized the four major areas: education (mainly primary), health (mainly AIDS), economic development, and democratization. Interestingly an ongoing strategic objective in environment/natural resources management was never raised by the Ugandians. On the other hand, in response to the high interest expressed in the focus groups in basic education, the mission proposed a strategic objective in that area, which was a new sector for USAID/Uganda. And the mission did launch a primary education program.

The third round concentrated on the top priority: education. The groups discussed how to go about education, what it takes to be a good teacher, how education is financed, etc. This helped us as we got into designing our activity in basic education. Based partly on the views expressed in the focus groups, we decided to stress quality of education, not numbers of students.

Feedback and Follow-Up. Once the CPSP was finalized, the mission made a point of giving copies to all the focus groups that we had worked with. We also made presentations about the whole process to the three focus groups with which we had worked most closely. This move was highly appreciated. We have tried to continue our relationship with the focus groups.

Through the participatory strategy-building process we learned more about Ugandans, generated enthusiasm in drafting the strategy documents, and improved the basis for project decisions. It was not a scientific process, but we are confident that we got closer to the customer.

The Africa Bureau's Best Practices

Curt Grimm

The Africa Bureau surveyed its field missions as to the benefits of participation, the ways in which it might be improved, and the constraints to promoting participation. I will summarize some of the more generalized findings of this survey. (A report on some of the results of this survey is available from AFR/DP, Room 2495 NS: "Development Fund for Africa. Achieving Participation: A Collection of the Africa Bureau's 'Best Practices'").

Beneficial aspects of participation:

- Participation has a legitimizing effect on local institutions and organizations, which obtain information on donor agencies and their processes and which increase in stature as a result of the simple act of holding formal consultations with USAID.
- On the other side of the coin, USAID gains immeasurable respect and increases its own legitimacy by reaching out to diverse elements. Suspicion about it decreases and its credibility increases. However, participation should not be a single-shot gesture; transparency should be continual to maintain credibility.

Room for improvement:

- Many groups outside of USAID say that local participation in program strategy development seems to take place after key decisions about sector interventions have been made. The Uganda experience is an exception. Part of the problem is confusion about the process, not intentional lack of transparency.

Constraints:

- Shortage of staff time.
- Procedural rigidities within the Agency.
- Bad mutual perceptions between NGOs and donors.

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barriers that are real and will continue to exist.

"On the other hand, the upheavals, uncertainties, and frequent changes of government make it difficult for missions to have continuity in their consultations or confidence that they will provide a solid foundation for medium to long-term strategy development. While missions can learn from the experiences of others, each mission needs to try to find ways to take advantage of the opportunities to promote local participation that arise from their special country circumstances (as in the Etats Generaux in Togo).

"It is also clear that we in USAID have to recognize and to confront a series of internal constraints in order to achieve effective and broad-based local participation in our strategy development process. These range from straightforward staff and time constraints which limit our ability to seek as much outside participation as we might like, to abrupt changes in Agency priorities which may undermine or negate the consultative process.

"Promoting increased local participation in our strategy development may be challenging and time-consuming but it is essential to ensure that the people in the countries in which we work both contribute to and benefit from our development efforts. The benefits far outweigh the costs!"

Joan Atherton. "To me, several things are critical in promoting participation in strategy development:

** Missions must have not only policy guidance (including an appropriate legislative framework) and commitment at senior levels of Agency management, but must have flexibility to seek an approach to participation that is compatible with local customs and behavior. Best practices are useful to exchange among missions, but supply-side efforts to provide "tools" for participation at the country strategic planning level cannot adequately respond to the variability of country settings.

** Missions must also have some hope of being able to respond appropriately to the needs and desires expressed by participants, and, to the extent that programs are constrained by overlapping priorities set by Congress, the Administration, and other outside interest groups, participation can raise expectations without being able to deliver.

** Wherever possible, missions should take advantage of ongoing host-country or other donor efforts at consultation. This has two benefits -- a host country process of listening to its own peoples is the most desirable and sustainable form of participation; and missions would not feel that they have partially committed themselves to follow-on action by eliciting people's demands.

** Increasing participation in country program strategic planning does not automatically insure greater sustainability of USAID's program, as the Togo case clearly shows.

** Participatory processes are time-and staff-intensive and set up a constant tension with the Agency pressure for demonstrating results in the short term.

** Due to policy and programming parameters, missions must be encouraged to analyze the findings of their participatory efforts and shape a program that meets budgetary and other exigencies, while at the same time responding to the input received via participation. More attention is needed to ensuring that the results of these deliberations are reported back to participants, so that USAID's decision-making becomes more transparent."

USAID is trying to address these constraints. By participation we can build a consensus around what USAID is doing and thus make it more effective and efficient.

Issues Raised During the Discussion Period

- Cultural differences between ourselves and host country nationals as a potential impediment to participation.
- Use of focus groups for assessing project performance.
- Effect of DFA legislation on the Africa Bureau's interest in participation.
- How USAID can encourage participation in developing-country decision-making processes.

Communications from the E-Mail Bag

Additional Comments from the Presenters

Anne Williams. "I believe that there are certain other points that one must emphasize, in addition to those mentioned in the Forum. The first is how one copes with raised expectations brought on by participation. The people participating in any process will expect that they will somehow benefit directly from the results of their participation. USAID must learn to deal effectively with those expectations.

"Partnership implies equality and respect for the opinions of the partners. It also demands responding to the partners in a responsible manner. While everyone has their own agenda, USAID must be able to change its agenda in a responsive, responsible way where necessary. It must also be prepared to accept certain results (i.e., of a free and fair election) even if it does not like those particular results. It must also be prepared to accept a NO to its suggestions. I have found that this is not always easy for USAID to do."

John Grant. "It is clear from the three case studies that the turbulence and change in Africa as the countries struggle to make a democratic transition presents both opportunities and challenges to increased participation in mission strategy formulation. As the people crack the old regimes there is unprecedented sense of freedom, activism and openness that missions can support and build on to shape their strategies.

Keith Sherper. "Local Participation in conceptualizing and preparing a USAID country strategy is a valuable aspect of the development process.... It is not a substitute for a proper economic policy environment, political stability, and an open democratic system; rather it is a vital complementary element for attainment of development.

"The presentations from Chad, Togo and Uganda...brought out a number of salient features for more widespread consideration.

** Be flexible in the manner in which you solicit participation. We are learning and there is no standard paradigm. Variations across countries in terms of stage of development, openness of the system, culture, intracountry differences and other factors necessitate locally tailored approaches. Use what works.

** Of the three methods applied in Uganda (offsite mission retreat including FSN's, entire mission involvement in review of strategy background papers, organized focus groups) the focus groups reached a poorer segment of the population. Among focus groups those managed through an indigenous NGO probably were the most representative. Scientific preciseness is not the object; a healthy cross-section of individual and community-level views is what is being sought. Make sure that focus groups truly portray a characteristic representation, or acknowledge and understand the bias. Women, youth and the more elderly may not be fairly represented unless specifically requested.

** Undertake local participation early in the strategy-making agenda, even before sector interventions are decided. In our case it influenced the decision to engage in the education sector.

**Strategic choices may be limited because of the inability to accommodate bureau and agency priorities or congressional earmarks. Washington tends to be part of the problem; each policy instruction, earmark, and objective impinges if not infringes on the nature and extent of participation of those at the grassroots. Where one places the fulcrum for proper balance between top-down control and participation is of great consequence.

** Do not forgo analytical studies on a variety of key topics such as health, education, the economy, etc. However, even these benefit from participatory consultation as they are being drafted....

** Listen carefully to views expressed. They may not be eloquent, but they are genuine. Language might be a problem, but recognize it and put the extra effort in to communicate effectively.

** Accept that popular views on a subject may not, and often will not, mirror those of the government. This will add to the challenge of creating a strategy that is suitable and consistent with national priorities while addressing community-based development needs within the confines of our comparative advantage.

** Follow through with continuing communications. Local participation and input to the design, implementation, and impact measurement stages are valuable as well as serving as periodic reality checks on the strategy. In our case, we have not seen too much of the, "what's in it for me," syndrome. On the other hand, there is increased confidence by participants to reveal problems and seek solutions. We used some of the same focus groups to conduct sample surveys related to the election process.

We found that the process of listening and seeking a wide range of views was appreciated.... To the extent that such exchanges take place it can only contribute to a sense of empowerment and a more open society over time."